

NATURE'S NEWS

From: Four Winds Nature Institute - www.FourWindsInstitute.org

A Newsletter for Parents, Teachers, and Students participating in Four Winds Natural Science Workshops

Topic of the Month:

LEAF LITTER

The leaf litter on the forest floor is a rich ecosystem, home to millions of seen and unseen plants and animals, many of which depend on one another for food and shelter. Many of the inhabitants of the forest floor are decomposers, organisms that break down and recycle plant and animal debris.



Many critters in the leaf litter are arthropods, animals like insects and spiders with hard outer coverings and jointed legs. Mites and millipedes feed on decaying plants, while springtails eat fungi. These tiny animals are food for hungry predators both small and large. The bright orange Red Eft, a young form of the Red-spotted Newt, feeds on springtails and other arthropods in the leaf litter. Birds like the woodcock nest and forage on the forest floor, hunting for worms with their long bills. The white, root-like threads that we find among the decaying leaves are a part of the fungi that live in the leaf litter and help to digest dead leaves and wood.

Plants and animals in and under leaf litter are protected from extremes of temperature and weather by the canopy of trees overhead. The forest floor is a cool, shady environment, and a place where important nutrients are returned to the soil.

LEAF LITTER LIFE

A surprising number of tiny animals live under the leaves that litter the forest floor. Most spend their days under the protective layer of leaves, coming out only at night.

To see some of the tiny leaf litter inhabitants, gather up a handful of leaf litter to take home. Get plenty of the damp leaves near the ground. You can get the tiny animals to come out of hiding with a Berlese funnel. Make one by inverting a milk jug and cutting off the bottom. Cut a piece of wire screen into a circle that fits into the wide mouth of the funnel. Sit the funnel on a jar. Put some leaf litter on the screen and



place it under a lamp. Leave the lamp on for several hours. The heat will drive any animals down through the leaves, where they'll fall through the mesh into the jar. What have you caught? Return the creatures to their forest floor home after observing them.

NEWS FROM SCHOOL



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